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AUTHOR Hume, Susan E.
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ABSTRACT

This digest offers practical suggestions for inclusion of teaching about Africa in the curriculum. The document highlights four suggestions that teachers must: (1) confront myths and stereotypes about Africa; (2) avoid faulty generalizations; (3) present a balanced view of the countries on the continent; and (4) limit the scope of study due to Africa's enormous size and diversity. Integration of African topics into the curriculum is advocated with specific examples given for social studies, language arts, French language classes, art, and music. Five types of resources for teaching about Africa are identified: (1) Internet resources; (2) bibliographies; (3) museums; (4) Peace Corps; and (5) teachers' travel experiences. (EH)

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BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA 47408
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Teaching about Africa

by Susan E. Hume

People from African countries who visit the United States often are stunned by how little Americans know about African cultures. Africa is a large continent more than three times the size of the continental United States, and it contains over 50 independent countries. One out of every three member states in the United Nations is an African country. One out of every ten people in the world lives on the African continent. Increasingly, the United States has trading and corporate ties to African countries. Now, more than ever, our students need a basic understanding of Africa.

Suggestions for Teaching about Africa. Four key suggestions are presented.

Confront myths and stereotypes. It seems that no other part of the world conjures up so many myths in the minds of Americans as Africa. A good way to begin a study of the continent is to identify and dispel some of the myths and stereotypes commonly held by Americans. To aid in the discussion, it is useful to compare these American misconceptions of Africa with the myths and stereotypes people in African countries have about the United States. For instance, many Americans believe that all Africans are poor, while many Africans think that all Americans are rich. Americans commonly perceive Africa as a violent, dangerous place. People in African countries often believe the same thing about America. To assist in the discussion of this topic, LESSONS FROM AFRICA (Merryfield 1989) includes a lesson entitled "Stereotypes Kenyan and Liberian Youth Have about Americans."

Avoid faulty generalizations. The African continent has many different climatic zones and landscape features that vary from deserts and savannas to tropical rainforests and snow-capped mountains. It is home to people of every size, shape, and skin color with hundreds of distinctive languages and cultures. The characteristics of neighboring countries can be very different. Teachers must be careful not to take a single example and present it as the norm for all of Africa.

Present a balanced view. Most of the attention that Africa receives in the American media is negative. It is easy to dwell on the negative when teaching about Africa. Teachers should not deny the existence of problems in African countries, such as poverty, disease, famine, and war. Students should be encouraged to go beyond the headlines and explore the root causes of these problems. They also should learn about the many complex cultures that diverse African peoples have created. To focus only on Africa's problems is a disservice to its people and our students.

Limit the scope of study. Due to its enormous size and diversity, it is impossible to teach all of Africa in a unit or semester of study. Depending on the time available, a class might focus on a single country or choose a country from each region for an expanded study. Nigeria is often a popular choice of study because of the extraordinary cultural and physical diversity within the country. Similarly, Cameroon has been referred to as "Africa in miniature." A teacher may select a country of focus based on available resources or because of a connection to the local community.

Africa's Place in the Curriculum. The study of Africa can be woven into many parts of the elementary and secondary school curriculum.

Social studies. The study of Africa is usually associated with world history and geography courses. Yet, Africa can be integrated into many of the other social studies as well. For instance, in an American history class, students may examine how the Cold War shaped United States foreign policy toward Africa. In their study of sociology, students can see how the roles of women are changing in many African societies or how urbanization in Africa is affecting family relationships. Economics students might consider how exchange rates and changes in world market prices affect the internal economies of African countries and influence their relationships with other nations.

Language arts. Young students enjoy reading African folktales. They often discover plots and morals parallel to those found in European folktales. One activity for students is to pick out the human qualities given to certain animals such as the spider, hare, and hyena and compare these with folk characters from other parts of the world. By reading African folktales, students gain insight into the attributes most valued by African societies, such as cleverness, wisdom, and bravery. Many anthologies of African folktales are now available.

A wealth of literature by contemporary African writers can meet the interests of high school students. Teachers may choose to sample a specific genre from several countries, focus on the literature of a single country, or concentrate on the writings of one author. A novel, THINGS FALL APART, by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe has become a favorite in many English departments. Literature by African writers is increasingly available in bookstores and libraries.

French language classes. More French speakers live in African countries than in France. Yet, most French language textbooks devote very little attention to these countries. Lessons on Francophone Africa give students the opportunity to see the ways in which French language and culture have influenced these countries, as well as how the countries have retained their unique characteristics. African-American students also may find new relevancy in the language. LA DIVERSITE EN AFRIQUE FRANCOPHONE (Dern 1991) is one of several curriculum guides that have been developed to supplement French language textbooks in this area.

Art. Textiles, jewelry, woodcarvings, metal work, pottery, and stone sculpture are some of the common types of art found in various African countries. Many art museums in the United States have at least modest collections of African art and curators willing to share information with students and teachers. Washington, DC is home to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art. For

Susan E. Hume has served since 1993 as the outreach coordinator for the African Studies Program at Indiana University.

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information about tours and the loan program, teachers can contact the museum's Department of Education on weekdays at (202) 357-4860. If the objective is to create the art rather than just appreciate it, teachers can help students to create African textile designs such as tie-dye, wax-resist, brush batik, and stencil resist. The directions for each of these are included in a curriculum guide, DAILY LIFE IN AFRICA: VARIETY IN AFRICAN DRESS (Leoni and Yoder 1982).

Music. American students enjoy listening to music from Africa. Both traditional and popular music vary tremendously from one country to another. As all kinds of international music become more popular, African music is readily available in local music stores. Also, many public radio stations across the United States carry a weekly program entitled AFROPOP WORLDWIDE, which features the music of Africa and the African diaspora. Students are fascinated by the wide variety of musical instruments played in Africa. Americans usually associate percussion instruments with Africa, but stringed instruments are very common, too. Teachers can combine music and art to help their students create and play simple versions of some musical instruments. Directions are contained in a curriculum guide, DAILY LIFE IN AFRICA: CELEBRATIONS OF AFRICAN LIFE (Leoni and Yoder 1982).

Resources for Teaching about Africa. Five types of resources are discussed.

Internet resources. The amount of information about Africa on the Internet is growing rapidly. Internet resources include basic statistics, maps, photographs, travel information, recipes, and addresses for sources of further information. Searching by country name is a good way to begin.

Bibliographies. To find appropriate reading materials for students, at least two very helpful bibliographies are available. OUR FAMILY, OUR FRIENDS, OUR WORLD (Miller-Lachmann 1992) contains a chapter of bibliographic entries devoted to Africa. AFROPHILE: RECOMMENDED TITLES ON AFRICA FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE (Randolph 1994) lists over 450 titles by interest level. In both books, all of the titles listed have received positive reviews from African scholars and educators.

Museums. Art museums, children's museums, and natural history museums often feature permanent or special exhibits related to Africa. These institutions usually offer special tours for school groups and educational materials to accompany the exhibits. Many museums maintain lending collections of books, audio-visual materials, and artifact kits. Some also host Africa-related guest lectures, artistic performances, and film series.

Peace Corps. World Wise Schools was created in 1989 to help educate American children about the countries the Peace Corps serves. The organization links American students in grades 3-12 with Peace Corps volunteers serving in countries around the world. Students and volunteers can exchange letters, pictures, audio cassettes, and small artifacts. Teachers may also contact the World Wise Schools office (1990 K Street, Suite 9500, Washington, DC 20526; telephone number (800) 424-8580, ext. 2283) for the names of returned Peace Corps volunteers living in or near their community. Many returned volunteers are eager to visit classrooms and share their overseas experiences. World Wise Schools produces country-specific educational videos and study guides. The current collection on African countries includes Senegal, Lesotho, and Cameroon.

Teachers' travel experiences. Each summer, a select group of teachers go to Africa through the Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad Program. The participants spend five or six weeks traveling and studying in one or more African countries. Many of the curriculum units they develop upon returning home are available to all teachers.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia, 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, announced monthly in the CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from the UMI reprint service.

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